

English Essayists. Those writers who have achieved the very first excellence in the familiar style of writing, are few in number. Steele, Goldsmith, Washington Irving and Charles Lamb, are the four greatest, and if of these, judged simply as familiar essayists, Charles Lamb must be deemed *facilis princeps*, it is not so easy to discriminate between the claims of the remaining three for second place. In style, as well as in choice of subject, and natural bent of mind, Washington Irving bears a strong resemblance to Steele. They both possessed the same simplicity of mind, combined with kindness and comprehensive charity: the same deeply reverential spirit characterized them both, and if Washington Irving was not so prone as Steele, to turn his essays into short sermons, it is in a great measure because the accidents of his life, and the tone and temper of the age in which he lived, forbade it. Essayists in the familiar style appeal directly to their readers as friend to friend; they attempt to engage the heart rather than attract the intellect, and the measure of their success can therefore be gauged better by our affection for them as men, than by our admiration for them as authors. The strong personal feeling which we have for such writers as Lamb, Goldsmith, and Irving, is in some respects a curious phenomenon. It is altogether independent of, and uninfluenced by, their character or the events of their lives, but arises entirely from the effect of their writings upon our emotions and susceptibilities. The reason for this would appear to be that perfection in such writing cannot be approached by any man unless his nature fit him pre-eminently for it, so that the writing is in the truest sense the man. The knowledge of this is unconsciously present to every reader; we know that we are being admitted behind the veil, and that the author's nature, his likes, his dislikes, sometimes his very soul, are laid bare before us, and naturally we love him as we do a

friend who entrusts us with his every secret. Mere frankness of confession, however, such as Rousseau's or De Quincey's does not necessarily produce such a result; there must not be the slightest intrusion of the tragic,—even our interest must not be too deeply aroused; we must be thoroughly satisfied with our author's nature, and through him with our own, it being delicately insinuated that, as he is, so are all men. Washington Irving rarely does more than confide to us his tastes and sentiments; he does not, like Charles Lamb, entrust us with his most sacred feelings, and his most human weaknesses; but although for this reason he does not lie so near our hearts as the gentle Elia, his graceful *bonhomie* and genial warmth render him peculiarly endearing. There is one faculty which essayists of Irving's type must possess in an abnormal degree, and that is taste, or tact, call it which you will. The slightest jar upon the feelings of a reader would neutralize their efforts, and it is only by the possession of this faculty, that men of crotchets, as to certain extent all such writers are, manage to write so as to please all readers. I think too, that another reason why we love these authors is, that as boys we revelled in their works. How well I remember the appearance, the very binding of the well-thumbed Washington Irving in the old school library! When I open the Sketch Book, or Bracebridge Hall, visions of hours of keen delight rise up before me, and I recognise anew the fact, that at no period of life is more enjoyment derived from books, than at that delightful age, which accepts all it reads unhesitatingly, and thinks a hint against its favourite authors treason. There are few authors who can claim equal sway over the boy's imagination and the man's intellect, but of these few Washington Irving is one, and his kindly unostentatious nature would have regarded a boy's delight as a more grateful offering than even the praise of critics.